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ABSTRACT

A study investigating how disadvantaged parents interact with their children in literacy tasks probed the following questions: (1) what styles of interaction do young, welfare-recipient mothers display when reading a story book with their preschool-aged child? and (2) how do the styles relate to factors such as the child's age and mother's literacy level? The 290 mothers in the study ranged in age from 16 to 21 years old; the children were between the ages of 27 and 63 months. Mothers were provided with a copy of "The Very Hungry Caterpillar" by Eric Carle and were asked to read the book to their child and take a few minutes to talk with him or her about it. Results showed that four distinct styles of book reading were displayed during the task: (1) straight readers, n=231, (who read the text aloud, but seldom paused to discuss the book during the actual reading); (2) standard interactive readers, n=231, (who paused during the reading and discussed the story); (3) non-readers, n=36, (who turned the pages and discussed the book, but did not actually read the book); and (4) recitation readers, n=9, (who asked their child to repeat the book back to them phrase by phrase). Interviews with the mothers showed that their choice of reading styles was governed by well-grounded assumptions about the reading process. In order for intervention reading programs to work, therefore, supervisors must have a clear understanding of a mother's assumptions and predispositions about literacy. Also, intervention programs need to treat mothers as learners about the role of book reading in literacy development and as active participants in creating a rich literacy environment for their children. Contains six references. (TB)

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Styles of Interaction During a Book Reading Task:

Implications for Literacy Intervention with Low-Income Families

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Intervention programs addressing early literacy among children in populations at high risk for educational failure generally focus on encouraging mothers to read with their preschool-aged children. Some programs are more explicit and make recommendations or demonstrate other behaviors beyond simply reading the books, behaviors such as talking about the book with the child and asking open-ended questions about the story. These interventions are based on several assumptions: 1) reading books with preschool-aged children is an important early literacy activity; 2) talking about the book during book reading and perhaps discussing the book after the reading are even more important early literacy activities, and 3) low-income mothers do not read books with their children, low-income mothers do not use an appropriate style when reading books with their children, and/or low-income mothers do not read books with their children often enough.

The difficulty is that there is very little information about how the mothers for whom these programs are designed would approach the book reading process with their children in the absence of intervention and, therefore, whether the interventions being suggested are superfluous, redundant, congruent or antithetical to behaviors already in these mothers' repertoire. Clearly, in order for home literacy interventions to be optimal, it is important that they be based on and built from knowledge about established book reading behaviors.

The questions which we will address in this paper are: 1) What styles of interaction do young, welfare-recipient mothers display when reading a story book with their preschool-aged children? and 2) How do the styles relate to factors such as the child's age and mother's literacy level?

Methods

The data for this study come from an observational study which was included as part of New Chance, a comprehensive program designed to help teenage mothers advance their education and acquire vocational skills in order to reduce their receipt of public assistance (Quint, Fink & Rowser, 1991). The 290 mothers in the observational study ranged in age from 16 to 21 years old: the children were between the ages of 27 and 63 months. They lived in seven different urban areas across the country and all were native speakers of English. 84.1% (244) of the mothers were African-American.

As part of the observational study, each mother was provided with a copy of The Very Hungry Caterpillar, by Eric Carle, and was asked "to read or look at the book with your child and then take a few minutes to talk about the book with your child afterwards." All of the mothers were able to follow these instructions, and each of the mother-child pairs engaged in some type of interaction using the book. In fact, most of the mothers in the study engaged in considerable talk with their children during the book reading. The mean number of maternal utterances exclusive of text was 50.76 with a range from 1 to 195; the mean number of child utterances was 32.32 with a range of 0 to 154.

All of the interactions were videotaped and transcribed using the CHAT transcription system (MacWhinney, 1991). Individual maternal and child utterances during the book readings were coded for types of talk and the overall book readings were globally coded for style.

Four distinct styles of book reading were displayed by the mothers during the task: 1) Straight readers: Mothers who read the text aloud, but seldom paused to discuss the book

during the actual reading (n=14, 4.8%); 2) Standard interactive readers: Mothers who paused during the reading and discussed the story with the child before continuing (n=231, 79.7%); 3) Non-readers: Mothers who turned the pages with their children and discussed the book, but did not read the book (n=36, 12.4%); and 4) Recitation readers: Mothers who read the text, either word by word or phrase by phrase, and requested that the child repeat the word or phrase right after it was read (n=9, 3.1%).

By assigning a style to a mother we are not saying that this is her exclusive style for book reading. We know that different types of books are associated with certain types of interactions, so mothers and children might have different types of interactions around different picture books. The Very Hungry Caterpillar was chosen because it is a book which provides opportunities for a variety of behaviors. However, we understand that the styles which we are identifying here simply represent the predominant activity of these mothers and children during the reading of this particular book. Further, although we are assigning styles to individual mothers, most of the mothers showed some other behaviors beyond those associated with that style. For example, mothers identified as recitation readers also incorporated some comments and questions typical of standard interaction readers. For the purposes of this paper, our interest is in identifying the main features of these styles and what they tell us about the mothers' assumptions about book reading with young children.

The Styles of Book Reading

Straight readers. In order to qualify as a straight reader, a mother had to produce five or fewer utterances related to the book during the book reading. On the whole, the straight readers' comments tended to be organizational in nature, calling the child's attention to the

book, or marking the beginning or the ending of the reading. During the straight readings, the children were expected to sit quietly by and listen.

There are a variety of reasons why mothers might choose to read a book straight through. First, a book might be highly familiar, and therefore the mother might feel that everything that could be said has been said about the book. Second, this might be the mother's usual book reading style with her child. For example, one mother, when asked to discuss the book with her child after a straight reading replied, "What am I supposed to say? Because I just read books. I don't talk to her about it." Thirdly, some straight readers might be waiting to do all their commenting during the requested discussion at the end of the book. But in this sample, the discussions held by the straight readers were no longer on average than were those of the mothers who adopted a different style.

And, finally, straight readers might be mothers who are reading to older children. In a longitudinal study of book reading to preschoolers, De Temple (1994) has found that the same mothers and children reduce their talk during book reading as children get older. In the New Chance sample, the mean age of the children of straight readers is higher (45.42 months, range = 30-63 months) than the mean age of children of non-readers (37.55 months, range = 29-55 months) or of recitation style readers (37.11 months, range = 27-57), but does not differ from those engaging in a standard interactive style.

Straight readers, therefore, may be operating on any one of a variety of assumptions about what book reading is all about and how it needs to proceed for their children. Except for the mother who told us that this is her usual style, we do not have enough information to be sure which of the reasons discussed above applies in individual cases of straight readers.

Standard interactive readers. The most common style by far in this sample is that of the standard interactive readers, who stop to engage their children in conversation about the book during the course of the book reading. There are differences, however, among the standard interactive readers concerning the type of comments which they choose to make about the book. Two types of talk have been identified: immediate talk - in which the information being sought or conveyed is immediately available from the text or illustrations (e.g., labeling, color naming, counting), and non-immediate talk - in which the information being sought or conveyed extends beyond the information immediately available from the book, (e.g., including the child's experience, predictions, explanations, inferences). In the following sample transcript of a standard interactive reader, immediate talk is in bold and non-immediate talk is underlined. Tyrone is 3 years 11 months.

Mom: "One Sunday morning the warm sun came up and pop out of the egg came a tiny and a very hungry caterpillar." **Look Tyrone! See the sun?** (points to sun)

Ty: (nods)

Mom: "On Friday he ate through five oranges but he was still hungry." **How many?**

Ty: **One two three four five.** (Mom points to oranges as Tyrone counts)

Mom: Right.

Mom: "On Saturday he ate through one piece of chocolate cake, one ice cream cone, one pickle, and one slice of Swiss cheese, and one slice of salami...That night he had a stomachache." Tyrone, why he had a stomachache?

Ty: Because!

Mom: Because why?

Ty: Because...

Mom: He ate all that food!

On average, 68.31% of the comments made during the book reading by the standard interactive readers were immediate talk, while only 3.45% were non-immediate. This means that non-immediate talk is relatively rare in this group, although it is potentially a very important type of talk. In the longitudinal sample mentioned earlier (De Temple, 1994), non-immediate talk was positively correlated with kindergarten language and literacy measures, while immediate talk was negatively correlated with the same kindergarten measures.

If we look for reasons why mothers use varying amounts of immediate and non-immediate talk, two background variables are of interest, child's age and mother's literacy level.

First, in the New Chance sample, the number of mothers' immediate utterances is negatively correlated with the child's age (-.22 $p=.001$). These mothers are using more immediate utterances with younger children, focussing on acquisition of labels, counting, and color names, and fewer immediate utterances with older children. However, the percent of mothers' non-immediate talk is positively correlated with the child's age (.29 $p=.0001$). A higher percentage of these mothers' utterances to older children are non-immediate. Even so,

the average percent of non-immediate talk in this sample (3.45%) is strikingly lower than that displayed by mothers with the youngest children in the longitudinal sample while reading the same book (10.33%).

Second, the use of immediate and non-immediate talk is related to the mother's literacy level in the New Chance sample. Mothers with higher literacy scores on the Test of Adult Basic Education are more likely to also have a higher percentage of non-immediate talk (.13, p=.04), and mothers with higher literacy scores are more likely to have less immediate talk (-.14, p=.03).

Standard interactive readers, therefore, can be divided into two main groups: 1) those who assume that books are opportunities for children to learn labelling, counting, and colors, and therefore concentrate on immediate talk during book reading, and 2) those who assume that books are also sources of stories and of information about the world, and therefore include the use of non-immediate talk during book reading.

Non-readers. The mothers who were non-readers interacted with their children mostly by using the illustrations in the book as the topic of discussion. This means that most of the talk in these interactions is immediate talk and that there is little or no attention paid to the story line of the book during the book reading. In the following transcript of a non-reader, immediate talk is in bold. Tara is 3 years 3 months.

Mom: **Look. You see? There's the caterpillar.** (pointing to the cover of the book) **You see him? Look at the book.**

Tara: (nods)

Mom: **Look at all these colors. You see them?**

Tara: (nods)

Mom: **What's this?**

Tara: **A sun.**

Mom: **And it's orange and yellow. You see it?**

Tara: (nods)

Mom: **What's this?** (pointing to apple)

Tara: **Apple.**

Mom: **And what color is the strawberry? Red.**

Tara: **Red.**

Mom: **What color's the apple?**

Tara: **Red.**

As can be seen from this transcript, the main purpose of this interaction seems to be to check the child's ability to perform such school-related skills as labelling objects, naming colors, and counting.

The first reason why a mother might approach a book reading in this fashion could be because she herself is not able to read the text to her child. However, the literacy scores for these mothers on average do not differ from the other groups, and the lowest scores on the literacy test for this group are not the lowest scores for the sample. In other words, mothers with lower literacy scores than any of these mothers did read the book to their children.

A second reason could be that these mothers might feel this is a more appropriate approach to reading a book with a younger child who might not be prepared to sit still for a

more extended book reading. And, in fact, the mean age of the children of non-readers (37.56 months) is significantly younger than the mean age of the overall sample (42.83 months), indicating that the non-readers are being sensitive to the needs of their young children in this situation.

The predominant assumption, then, of the non-readers in the New Chance sample is that books are opportunities to teach labelling, counting, and colors to their **young** children.

Recitation readers. The final style which was identified in this sample was a strikingly different style which we call recitation readers. In this style the mother reads a single word or a phrase from the text and expects the child to repeat what she has said verbatim. The mother in the following sample transcript even discusses this strategy with her child before beginning. In these transcripts both the text which is being read and the recitation by the child are considered immediate talk because they are text-bound. Immediate talk is in bold. Matthew is 3 years 6 months.

Mom: Remember how we usually read our books?

Matt: (nods)

Mom: You read them with me? You want to read after me?

Matt: Yep.

Mom: Okay. **Say "in the light of the moon."** (looks at Matt)

Matt: **In the light in the moon.**

Mom: **"A little egg."**

Matt: **A little egg.**

Mom: **"Lay on a leaf."**

Matt: **Lay on a leaf.**

Mom: **"One Sunday morning."** (looks to Matt to respond)

Matt: **One Sunday morning.**

Mom: **"The warm sun."**

Matt: **Warm sun.**

Mom: **"Came up."**

Matt: **Came up.**

Mom: **"Pop!"**

Matt: **Pop!**

Mom: **"Out of the egg."**

Matt: **Out of the egg.**

Mom: **"Came a tiny."**

Matt: **Came a tiny.**

Mom: **"And very hungry caterpillar."**

Matt: Yep.

In this style, the mother not only expects the child to repeat exactly what she has read from the book, but she most often points to the words as she reads them as well, further emphasizing the text for the child.

This recitation style has been observed by other researchers in other parts of the world. In a study in New Zealand, McNaughton, Ka'ai and Wolfgramm (1993) report the use of this technique among Tongans and Maori; it is also a style which has been observed among Turkish immigrants in Holland (Leseman, personal communication, 1993).

McNaughton and his colleagues believe that this style is based on an attitude towards text that makes it an inviolate entity which cannot be reinterpreted or reinvented, but must be conveyed as written. In their study, they compared the same mother and child pair reading a story book from the library in a standard interactive style, and then reading a story from a book sent home from school in the recitation style. The fact that the book came from school apparently meant that the text had to be transmitted in this fashion.

What would the purpose of this recitation reading be? What assumptions would the recitation readers be operating with? Judging from the approach of the mothers in the New Chance sample and the information about the recitation readers in other parts of the world, the purpose of book reading for these mothers would appear to be to teach their children how to read. In these recitation readings, then, the mother is helping the child learn to read by having the child follow the text, hear the words read allowed, and then recite the words so that they will be remembered.

It's clear that mothers of preschoolers demonstrate a variety of styles of interaction during book reading with their children. These styles reveal their assumptions about the purposes of looking at or reading books with young children. Their linguistic experiences during book reading are differentiated by: The occurrence of verbal interaction and discussion, distinguishing straight reading from interactive reading; the quality of the questions and comments, the use of immediate and non-immediate talk during book reading; and the treatment of the text as a story, requiring comprehension of connected events, or print, requiring the repetition of and visual attention to each word, as in the recitation style.

Conclusions

A disproportionate number of children from low-income families will have difficulty with literacy. According to a national study, fully half of all children growing up in families with incomes below the poverty level are unable to read at an intermediate level as young adults (NAEP, 1988). In response to these statistics, literacy intervention programs are being designed throughout the country targeting low-income mothers and their preschool-aged children.

In this paper, we have demonstrated that low-income mothers of young children bring their own understandings of how children learn and of what their children need to learn to the book reading situation, and that their behavior during book reading is guided by these beliefs. In order for an intervention program to be effective, therefore, we believe that an important first step must be observation of mothers' existing styles. Awareness of existing styles must then be taken into account when engaging the mother in discussions and instruction about the purpose of book reading with children. It is not enough to send books home with children, to encourage more book reading at home, to encourage child participation, or even to model interactional styles of book reading. In order for mothers' book reading behaviors to be enhanced, and to optimally promote literacy with their young children, intervention programs need to treat mothers as learners about the role of book reading in literacy development, and as active participants in creating a rich literacy environment for their children.

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